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COMMONWEAL

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CORRESPONDENCE

Unbalanced view

Upper Darby, Pa.

To the Editors: Once again *Commonweal* addresses the issue of homosexuality [issue of January 28], and once again, as was the case with your previous symposium [November 22, 1991], the presentation lacks balance. Paul Baumann waxes romantic concerning the sexes, and even presumes that the afterlife in some way continues sexual differentiation.

My main disappointment is that orientation studies receive no mention. Homosexuals are psychologically and physiologically different from heterosexuals. The concept of sexual orientation was unknown until relatively recently, and the latest studies indicate a possible genetic component to the phenomenon.

Scripture is an exposition of the beliefs of the primitive church. Though it is a normative tradition, it does not appear to be inerrant in this regard. The procreative dimension lacking in same-sex relationships does not preclude the possibility that these relationships may witness to life-affirming, mutually enhancing, and, dare I say it, Christian values.

JOSEPH A. FERNANDEZ

This is dialogue?

Wilmington, Del.

To the Editors: Wow, what a wonderful new idea! A discussion of homosexuality with no homosexuals taking part! What's next? A discussion of feminism without feminists? Of Catholicism with no distracting interference by Catholics? Get real!

JOHN RYAN

First step to dialogue

Brooklyn, N.Y.

To the Editors: In "On the Air, No Room for Dialogue" [January 28], James L. Nash demonstrates his sincere, if frustrated, desire to engage in a constructive dialogue with lesbians and gay men. I suggest that the starting point for this dialogue is not the important theological issues that Professor Nash raises. Rather it should begin with the pledge that Catholics, enlivened by the radical love commandment of Jesus, will work for a community in which lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals are free from the threat of physical and economic violence; that Catholics condemn violence done to gay and bisexual people in their homes and in the streets; and that Catholics seek to end discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, race or enthnicity, sex, and creed.

Only by first witnessing to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community that the commitment to Jesus means a commitment to justice for all people—even when Catholic tradition is at odds with their way of life—can we realistically hope to begin a dialogue on the questions that Professor Nash raises.

ANNE PONTRELLI

Transcending biology

New York, N.Y.

To the Editors: Re: Paul Baumann's essay on homosexuality. Its analysis is careful, and the reading and thoughtfulness that underlie the analysis are, if anything, even more impressive. Nevertheless, since the Andrew Sullivan interview that Mr. Baumann cites was a conversation I participated in, I am moved to explain why Baumann's argument leaves me unpersuaded, or at least unsatisfied, at a couple of points:

1. Baumann writes: "Homosexual acts, by definition and in principle, sever the connection between sexuality and procreation." But if homosexual acts are human acts, their significance is not restricted to their physical description or physical effects. If homosexuality, as practiced by Christians, could be shown to be procreative in some way that transcends the biological, we might attempt to assign it a teleology fitted to Christian morality. That is the crux. So it will not do to reduce the significance of human sexuality, whether straight or gay, to the physical act itself.

2. Baumann writes: "For incarnational religion the intrinsically nonprocreative nature of homosexual acts is a metaphysical dead-end." Well, then, what about the intrinsically nonprocreative nature of my vowed chastity, my clerical celibacy? And as long as we are on the subject of the Incarnation, what are we to say of Jesus Christ?—who was born of a woman, all right, but not by a heterosexually procreative act. When Baumann pushes the incarnational argument as he does, he only proves to me that we can be fundamentalistic about almost anything, even so beautiful a truth as the Incarnation.

THOMAS H. STAHEL, S.J.

The writer is managing editor of America *magazine.*

The author replies:

In response to Thomas Stahel: My argument does not "reduce the significance of human sexuality...to the physical act itself," but it does insist that in a sacramental system sexual morality be anchored in embodiment and therefore in sexual acts. An incarnational ethic does not reduce sexuality to biology, but it necessarily presup-

(Continued on page 27)

Commonweal is indexed in Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, Catholic Periodical Index, Index of American Periodical Verse, Book Review Digest and Book Review Index. Microfilm from Vol. 1, 1924, to current issues available through University Microfilm, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106 and on Microfiche from Bell & Howell, Wooster, Ohio 44691. *Commonweal* articles also are available at many libraries and research facilities on CD-ROM and in electronic data bases. Serials Data program No.: ISSN 0010-3330. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional offices. Copyright © 1994 Commonweal Foundation. Single Copy, $2. Yearly subscriptions, U.S., $39; Canada, $41; foreign, $44. Special two-year rate: U.S. $67; Canada, $71; foreign, $77. Surcharge for air mail delivery to Europe, North Africa, Central or South America, $35 per year; for other parts of the world, $44 per year. All Canadian and foreign subscriptions must be paid in U.S. dollars by International Money Order or by check on a U.S. bank.

Illustrations: Cover, Emil Antonucci; p.4, Bacall, Rothco; p. 7, Paul Valerry; pp. 12, 18, 30, Jean Charlot; pp. 20, 22, Baloo, Rothco.

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Commonweal, [ISSN 0010-3330] A Review of Public Affairs, Religion, Literature, and the Arts, is published biweekly except Christmas/New Year's; and monthly July and August, by Commonweal Foundation, 15 Dutch St., New York, N.Y. 10038. Telephone: (212) 732-0800. Display advertising correspondence should be sent to Ruth E. Taylor, 11 Graffam Rd., So. Portland, Me. 04106 (207) 799-4387, classified advertising correspondence to 15 Dutch St. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Commonweal, 15 Dutch St. New York, N.Y. 10038.

Commonweal *welcomes letters on subjects treated in its pages. Letters of not more than 250 or 300 words naturally have a better chance of being published.*

Waiting for China

When the young Chinese dissident, Qin Yongmin, opposed Beijing's bid for the summer 2000 Olympics last year because of China's suppression of human and political rights, he was sentenced to two years at hard labor without a trial. Add him to the 1,700 Asia Watch says are imprisoned in China and Tibet for their religion, politics, or race.

With the world's largest population (1.2 billion, and an added 17 million this year alone), the world's fastest growing economy (13 percent in real growth last year), the world's largest standing army (over 3 million and a defense budget that has grown 22 percent since 1988), and a 4,000-year cultural heritage, China's political, economic, and strategic significance is commanding. That is why President Bill Clinton has wisely concluded that America's future prosperity will be linked in significant measure to the economic and political emergence of China. His playing host to Asian leaders in Seattle last November was an important signal of his intent to look East. Clinton's attention to U.S.-Chinese relations—in particular his executive order last June that China must improve its human-rights record if it hopes to retain most-favored-trading-partner status with the United States—is evidence of an important foreign policy initiative. To develop, clarify, and execute such a China policy will require both tact and resolve.

● Tact. The Communist rulers in Beijing take criticism—both internal and external—seriously. But they should: There is a great deal to criticize. The 1989 routing of democratic reformers, the Tiananmen massacre, and China's continued subjugation of Tibet are not aberrations but deliberate national policy. Religious believers who refuse to give full allegiance to the Chinese government continue to be hounded and imprisoned. The annual report on human rights violations issued by the U.S. State Department in February gave a particularly sobering evaluation of China. And more recently still, China's rejection of political reforms instituted in Hong Kong and its criticism of Britain for allowing such democratic experiments adds to a long list of negative reactions to international concerns about human rights.

Last summer President Clinton threatened to rescind China's most-favored-nation (MFN) trading status with the United States if Beijing does not make significant progress in human rights matters by this June. Revoking MFN status would be costly for both countries. U.S. customs duties on Chinese goods would rise from 8 percent to 40 percent, and Beijing would surely retaliate. Senator Max Baucus (D-Mont.) warns that an estimated 180,000 U.S. jobs could be lost.

Granted, MFN is a rather blunt instrument for carrying out foreign policy (only twelve countries do not rate MFN status). But President Clinton would be foolish to back away from the threatened sanctions. He must convince China's leaders that it is in their own interest to comply. With its burgeoning population, China's eco-

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nomic development is a prerequisite for its stability. But economic development is furthered by the expansion of political liberties. A break with the United States would lead to a significant economic setback for Beijing: Whereas Chinese trade with the United States measured a modest $2.5 billion in 1983, by last year it had risen to a substantial $40 billion.

● Resolve. While Clinton must be careful not to drive the Chinese to retaliation, he must hold the line. Otherwise, Beijing will view him as a weak leader, more interested in avoiding immediate domestic economic losses than in promoting human rights. Clinton can do this by spelling out the advantages of U.S.-China cooperation and by stressing America's regard for China's standing in the world. Still, as China's most famous dissident, Wei Jingsheng—who was released only last fall after serving fourteen years in prison—recently told the *New York Times* (January 29), "The Clinton administration has to be alert not to be cheated. If you do not exert continuous pressures, the Chinese government will very soon take back what it has said."

So far, Clinton's approach has delivered some positive results. For the first time in forty-five years the Chinese government has agreed to talk with the International Red Cross about providing access to political prisoners. A number of dissidents have been released. And in January President Jiang Zemin promised a visiting congressional delegation that China was "going to make an effort" to meet President Clinton's demands by June.

It is now up to Mr. Clinton. He must stand by his demands and watch after them with the same determination the dissident Mr. Wei shows.

OF SEVERAL MINDS Sidney Callahan

A TEXTBOOK CASE

MORE THAN YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT SEX

Must "erotic incoherence" be our fate for the foreseeable future? Last week I substituted in a class on human sexuality and began my preparation with the newly published college sex text (which shall remain nameless). On opening the book my eye lit on a reference to prostitutes as "sex workers," and I could predict what would follow.

Yes, these well-meaning sexologists see their mission in life as liberating the repressed from their sexual inhibitions—in the interests of free, mature, secular humanist values. All feelings of guilt, sexguilt, and shame must be rooted out: the only universally wrong sexual act with any ethical validity is rape or sexual coercion.

Masturbation, or sex for one, is extolled as safe and so readily available for single or marital sexual pleasuring; it should be taught, encouraged, and prescribed. (From mortal sin to therapy in one generation!) Pornography, renamed erotica, is defended; premarital and extramarital sex praised; and abortion rights championed. In one novel "advance," that surprised even me, mutually consenting S & M practices of bondage, pain infliction, whipping, spanking, leashing, master-slave domination, etc., are presented with approval, compared to playing cowboys and Indians. At least the authors do caution their student readers, "These games should not be played with strangers or new acquaintances."

Needless to say the numerous lifelike nude drawings of various sexual techniques and the biological information and diagrams are miles more sophisticated and thorough than the short shrift given to any moral, religious, or emotional dimension of human sexuality, i.e., "A person who is in accord with social customs and practices is usually considered moral or ethical." This then means that in some societies "infanticide" can be seen as "a meaningful, necessary traditional action, a moral behavior."

"My daughter is not ready yet. Would you like to join me in watching a short video on AIDS?"

Authors who will defend infanticide in the name of cultural relativism will not scruple to highlight and applaud a single study in 1984 which found 50 percent of older people reporting extramarital relations, half of them starting after fifty years of age. Indeed, "The older persons who had adulterous relationships reported an energetic, optimistic, 'let's-enjoy-life' attitude."

Well, you get the picture. This trip through the secular sexologists' looking glass induced the thought (with apologies to Hopkins): There lives the dreariest staleness of superficial shallow things. No wonder that these textbooks, while trying valiantly to be nonjudgmental, must present pages upon pages devoted to our society's growing sexual "problems": divorce, adolescent pregnancy, sexual dysfunctions, sexually transmitted diseases, rape, incest, child sexual abuse, pedophilias, and other paraphilias on the "sexual continuum."

Obviously the sexual signs of the times reveal that a monumental challenge awaits the church. Can Catholics present an alternative vision of sexuality and help this floundering culture? Unfortunately this rescue operation may not happen unless we in the church develop and work toward a more coherent, fleshed-out Christian sexual vision. The Benedictine theologian

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Sebastian Moore bemoans "the intellectual and spiritual poverty of the Catholic tradition on sexuality," and blames our condition on the serious chronic infection of stoicism and neo-Platonism picked up by the church in the fourth century. Stoicism, a socially transmitted disease of the spirit?

Moore claims that centuries of celibate rule and further inroads from the Enlightenment, have damaged Christian thinking on sexuality. The necessary Christian unity of heart and mind is split, desiring and knowing are conceived of as separate and disconnected. A healing of this Catholic disconnectedness in regard to sexuality is imperative, since the Roman Catholic church is "the only world-wide and world-old institution that is committed to changing the world" (a nice phrase, that, if a bit chauvinistic).

So, to begin anew, again. Did God create sex and say "That's good!" or didn't she? All Catholics are bound to answer in the affirmative, but the implication of this gospel "yes" to the goodness of created human sexuality and procreation needs articulation and development. As other theologians are constantly reminding us, we Christians are engaged in the endlessness of interpreting God's symbolic self-communication.

If with Vatican II's new interpretations we now grant that the ends of sexuality are both unity and procreation, how should these ends be interpreted, and how interrelated? Catholics also can never forget the power of evil and sin in the world, so questions about sexual sin aren't about to wither away. What is the difference, for instance, between lust (wicked) and love's erotic desire (God's good gift)?

Chastity, vowed celibacy, and fidelity are other resources in the Catholic treasury that need to be newly burnished and re-presented. I see the Christian ideal of sexuality as one that seeks to integrate into love all the dimensions of the person—body, mind, will, emotion, along with what some neurophysiologists inelegantly call "the lust system." Getting ourselves together is no easy task. Ironically in our hectic overworked lives, we can suffer a great deal from serious problems in arousing, cultivating, and continuing to feel sexual desire. The erotic spirit is willing but the flesh is weak; it cannot rise to the occasion.

A Christian ethic of sexual integrity must value embodiment and erotic desire as much as reasoned will. But erotic embodiment comes in many individual varieties and I doubt that we can have a Christworthy sexual ethic that discriminates along lines of gender or sexual orientation. Can we not on reflection come to discern a deeper, more personal understanding of unity and procreation? Unity rightly includes the exclusive committed pairbonding of intimacy, friendship, equality, and long-term fidelity. "We'll see each other through everything that comes, until death do us part." But must personal unity and faithful mutual commitment be exclusively reserved for heterosexual couples?

In the same way sexuality can be directly procreative whenever it is a possible and morally responsible option, but when it isn't, there are other important ideals of procreative fruitfulness to be lived. Having children is God's greatest blessing, but generativity is a name we give to the ways that persons nurture others in the community and mentor the next generation. Sexual happiness can manifest itself in an outpouring of creative energy in caring for one's own biological children or caring for others. Successful religious vowed to celibacy and single Christians also manage to mother, father, and befriend the persons and communities in their lives.

Here the crucial question comes to the fore of whether those Christians who desire to live as a sexually committed homosexual or lesbian couple must be asked to live as though they are vowed celibates or single persons without partners. Much needs to be thought and said about this controversial question, but I have no more space. Next column.

For now I'll end with the ever-reliable pious hope. Surely the general shambles we observe in the current secular sexual scene can be influenced by Christian evangelical efforts to proclaim and live a gospel vision of love and sexuality. That's for outside; inside the church I hope and believe that new voices are being heard and helping a renewed vision of Christian sexuality to be born—a homebirth this time, with midwives, and families in attendance. □

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WOULD BOMBING WORK?

FIRST, A FEW QUESTIONS

There is, at the time of this writing, an agreement that NATO will start using air strikes against the combatants in Bosnia, to force them into peace talks, if they have not moved their heavy weaponry away from Sarajevo.

My problem with the idea that bombing will help is certainly not based on any feeling that the Serbian cause has been misunderstood. It is all too clear, and can be dismissed, just as the Nazi need for "living space" could be dismissed. The Nazi comparison is a little too compelling, however, as is the other misleading model, Vietnam. The two questions most often offered are these: If we do not act, will we be guilty of the sort of inaction that allowed Hitler his early victories and prepared us for a world war? If we do act, will we involve ourselves in another Vietnam (where our involvement was defended by comparisons with Munich), and are we really prepared to do that?

Although these comparisons make some sense, there are other questions which have been waved away, dismissed as if they were little distractions in the face of the truly important questions. These questions are essential, however, to the question of the morality of intervention by bombing, which is to say intervention by turning other human beings into various forms of ground meat. We are not allowed to do this lightly, as people who are commanded to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, who must love one another as God has loved us.

Why—if the horrors that have been done in and to Sarajevo compel all decent people to support intervention—are we not also compelled to intervene in Burundi and Liberia? Why were we not compelled to intervene in Cambodia, during that genocide? Is it simple racism? I do think racism is involved here: Burundi and Liberia don't feel as much like part of our common heritage as Sarajevo does, even though the slaughtered aged, women, and children in those countries are just as human as Bosnians. The horrors that go on are as horrible, but we have had our cameras and our sympathies trained elsewhere, for reasons that are cultural, not accidental.

Does television's ability to make us all part of a global village also allow the people with the cameras (who have the power to decide where they will not point) to determine for us the areas with which we must be militarily concerned? If Sarajevo, why not Burundi? And if not Burundi, why not? And if both, why not everywhere? Why not Chiapas? Tibet? Will we be compelled to intervene in South Africa if, in a few weeks, the election results lead some people to take up arms against others, and the slaughter turns ugly? Do we have a number at which the ugliness compels intervention? Are sixty civilians in one shot too few, seventy-five a green light? "American interests" as a reason for intervention make a good, cold-sounding reason for being or not being involved, but it really isn't as clear as it might seem. Are we talking about oil, open markets, or the morality of freeing people from oppression? Is it in our interest to ensure peace everywhere? Can we? Most interventionist rhetoric is based on the notion that the Serbs are cowards who will beg for mercy at the sound of the first explosion. This is much like the sort of analysis that knew for sure that the Vietnamese and the Afghans couldn't possibly withstand the might of American and Soviet military technology. Are our interests economic (as they were in the Gulf)? Or moral? Or do they have to do with threatened and, at this post-cold-war point, not very clear "spheres of influence"? Or do they have to do with a compelling national need to respond to the most moving TV journalism?

We should (interventionists argue) never again allow another genocide to occur, and they point to the Nazi-like behavior of the Serbs. Why were they not so eager to go after Pol Pot? Should we have done that? What would have been the consequences? What would be the consequences of a policy which is from one point of view obviously moral, and an extension of this logic—one which would have us militarily involved in Bosnia, Burundi, Liberia, Mexico, those areas where Kurds are threatened, ready to move into South Africa...? Or do we let people with all the moral discernment of George Bush and Bill Clinton decide which of these causes will move us to action, and which will not?

The post-cold-war world is, as many have commented, a more complex place (or at least this new complexity is the reigning journalistic cliché and must be honored). One thing that has not changed is the desire for solutions that are simpler than a complex world may allow. The desire to do something, when we see the horrors visited upon the people of Sarajevo, is understandable. But we have to understand that we cannot drop some bombs and then stop doing anything, if the bombs don't "work." Unless we are prepared to deal with the possibility of a much wider war and ground troops, or with a little bloody garland of bombs and nothing more, we should be prepared not to intervene. The possibilities of Greek, Albanian, and Turkish involvement (if the war expands into Macedonia and Kosovo) are real, as is the strengthening of the worst nationalist impulses in Russia and the former Russian territories.

This is not to say that we should be paralyzed in the face of all these questions. We should, in any event, be more cautious than the newly converted liberal hawks seem to know how to be. It could be that a prolonged, Vietnam-like conflict is just what is called for here. But we also have to ask why this conflict, and not all or most or some of the equally horrifying things that happen elsewhere, should eat our children.

The examples of Afghanistan and Vietnam are somewhat misleading (because they were products of the cold war, a struggle between communism and anti-communism, and this is even more complicated) but not completely inappropriate. What we should not imagine is that a little bombing will end a horror that goes too deep into the human heart to be bombed away. □

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HOW CATHOLIC ARE THE IRISH?

LESS CONVENTIONAL, MORE COMMITTED

RUTH L. O'HALLORAN

"*Dia duit*" ("God be with you") is the traditional greeting in the West of Ireland among the hardy few who still cling to the ancient Irish language. The standard reply is "*Dia agus Mhuire duit*" ("God and Mary be with you"). Does this lovely greeting still reflect the mind of a deeply religious people or have the words lost their meaning through habitual use? To put the question in more general terms, is the Catholic church in Ireland really in crisis, as we so often hear, or do most of the Irish still "keep the faith"?

As a "returned Yank," I recently spent a month in Ireland seeking the answer to this question in conversations with friends and in Irish publications. Despite the mixed impressions I received, I came away more cheered than I had expected to be.

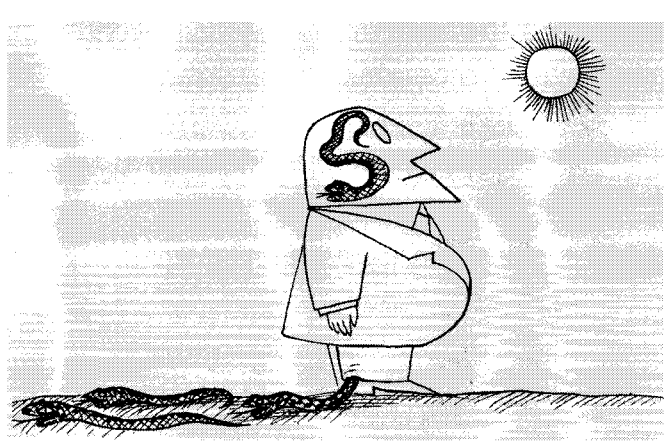
Most American Catholics, whether of Irish descent or not, probably think of Catholicism and nationalism in Ireland as almost synonymous. In the six Northern counties now under British control this has remained largely true—with implications too complex for me to touch on here. But in the Republic of Ireland, which was estimated to be 95 percent Catholic when it gained its independence seventy years ago, a new generation has grown up that has no recollection of colonial status.

Once independent of the English, it was not surprising that the largely rural and conservative Irish incorporated Catholic principles into their 1937 Constitution. This document even specified that the church should have a "special position" in the young state although church and state were entirely separate. The phrase rankled with many in both the Republic and the North and was removed from the Constitution two decades ago, the first of a series of constitutional revisions which reflect the enormous changes that have transformed Irish society in the current generation.

The position of Catholic bishops in the new Irish Republic was delicate since their appeal was supposed to be only to the consciences of voters and politicians. In fact they did occasionally exert direct pressure on the government. One such case was the ill-fated "Mother and Child" scheme in 1951 when the government backed down from its intention to provide free medical care for expectant mothers and children because the hierarchy declared that such action on the part of the government would interfere with family and individual rights.

However, this was an exceptional case. Although bishops in the Republic possess no real political power, they are widely perceived as authoritarian. Such a view is especially embraced by Irish journalists, many of whom have been giving the hierarchy a very bad press. Because Irish laws that reflected Catholic teaching concerning contraception, abortion, and divorce have become the subjects of heated national debate in recent years, the bishops frequently publish statements concerning the moral aspects of these issues. Such statements are often resented, not just by the media, but by Ireland's large group of sophisticated, urban, young adults.

These articulate young people, mostly born during Ireland's era of prosperity in the '60s, are well educated. Their schooling, mostly under Catholic auspices—Protestants attend their own schools with equal tax support—is of a high standard and has produced citizens with lively minds, inclined to question all authority. The government is singled out for their special ire because of its failure to provide jobs, but church and fam-



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ily are also flouted in the swinging life-style of many young adults, a style which follows closely on American and European models. In their tastes in music, entertainment, fashions, and above all, in their sexual morality, the departure of many young people from traditional Irish norms is strikingly apparent.

Again and again, friends of my generation resignedly described their adult children's broken marriages, unbaptized children, or live-in arrangements. Several spoke of grandchildren born out of wedlock, a rare occurrence among middle-class families twenty years ago when both church and society would have expected such infants to be quietly placed out for adoption. The large families of the '60s have been replaced with families of one or two—a third child is considered a "status symbol" because its arrival means the mother can rarely go on working outside the home. The trend toward small families can be traced directly to the gradual relaxation of the government's ban on the importation and sale of contraceptives. The fact that the Catholic church has never relaxed its prohibition of contraception is so generally ignored as to appear almost irrelevant.

Not only in this matter but in its over-all influence, the authority of the hierarchy has been steadily eroding. In 1992 it dropped to its lowest point when Annie Murphy exposed her affair with Bishop Eamon Casey. I was surprised by the generally tolerant and forgiving attitude which members of my generation expressed toward the bishop. His many years of dedicated work for Irish emigrants in London, for the poor of his own diocese, and as head of *Trocaire* (Mercy) overseas have not been forgotten. Whatever his faults may have been, they reminded me, the bishop of Galway has paid dearly. He has been banished by his peers, hounded by the press, and exploited by the mother of his son, yet he has been given no opportunity to tell his side of the story.

Young adults, on the other hand, seemed more shocked, not so much by the bishop's sexual immorality as by his apparent fiscal impropriety and what they saw as his hypocrisy. Now that the affair has cooled down somewhat, my own impression is that the faith of practicing Catholics remains unshaken by this scandal although they could not have failed to see that a member of their hierarchy had been made to look like a fool. Casey, in fact, has become the butt of much wicked Irish wit, and, as a result, the authority of church leadership in Ireland has suffered still further erosion.

In 1983, a national referendum led to another amendment to the Constitution, this time by the addition of a ban on abortion. In 1992, the notorious "X" case, in which a fourteen-year-old girl had been made pregnant by her friend's father, became a test for this abortion ban. I was told that this was a case of statutory rape since the girl was a minor, but she did not claim there was any element of force in her on-going relationship with the older man. When her mother realized her daughter was pregnant she took her to England to procure an abortion.

Every year an estimated four thousand Irish women quietly travel to England for this purpose. In the "X" case, however, publicity concerning her intention led to a court injunction to prevent her from traveling abroad to end an unborn life that was protected by the Constitution. Her threat to commit suicide then led to a reversal of the court decision and she had the abortion in England as originally planned.

Other factors enter into this complex case, including a citizen's freedom to travel, but the upshot appears to be that a new drive to permit abortions in extreme cases (threatened suicide probably would not be acceptable) may eventually lead to a weakening of the ban. Throughout the controversy, church leadership stressed the equal rights to life of mother and child and that Irish obstetricians are renowned for their skill in saving

Robert J. Oberg

Rooster

And when we return
from the garden's anguish or vision
doesn't the rooster's crown
look different against the scratched ground
and chicken fence of the pit,
razors of our weakness wedged in its talons,
glutinous talons that will be handed over with the neck,
severed beneath the axe of the man who fed it.

Will we remember the fight
when the neck, feet and entrails simmer on the stove,
and the breast, halved, with garlic and crushed pepper,
roasts.
Will we eat only what the spirit demands
not for the sensuous melding of flesh,
to eat the hacked limbs unhastily,
taste our own limbs that too will be hacked,
that too will cry out *I do not know the man*,
do not know love, do not know how to overcome
desire's longing for more flesh pricked from the carving
block,
the body sated, knives and forks washed,
eaten as if saying *if only it would bleed*,
as we will bleed, feed on our death.

Will we ever say *yes*,
the blood dripping from our mouths,
the bones broken.
Will we stay awake when the hour is come,
our feet clutching the perch,
sing our natures beneath death's folding wing,
accepting the rooster's red comb,
the runes and excrement scratched into earth
along the paths of laying hens.

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both lives. Recent polls, however, indicate that most Irish Catholics have come to accept the idea of legal abortions under very limited circumstances.

Irish Catholic couples, like married couples throughout the industrialized world, are increasingly likely to divorce and there has been much discussion of removing the constitutional ban on divorce, at least for cases where no real marriage has existed for five years or more. In 1986 a divorce referendum was initiated by the then leader of the Fine Gael government, Garret FitzGerald. In the antidivorce campaign that followed, there was little reference to the biblical injunction against putting asunder what God had put together. On the contrary, the possible loss of property rights for the ex-wives and their children, as well as the disruption of society, were the principal arguments used to bring about the proposal's overwhelming defeat.

However, six years later, when a Fianna Fail government brought out a white paper which broached the possibility of divorce, the whole topic caught fire again, and Prime Minister Albert Reynolds vowed to bring the matter to a vote this year. Friends to whom I spoke about the prospects of at least limited divorce in Ireland seemed divided, with most older Catholics still strongly opposed. Whether some form of divorce will be allowed, despite church opposition, is anyone's guess. If the strong Irish women's movement has its way, I suspect that divorce with freedom to remarry—not just the legal separation which is now available—is not far off.

The vigor of Irish Catholic feminism has been the greatest revelation to me during recent trips to Ireland. The Ireland I first encountered in the 1950s was very much a man's country. Social life, except among well-to-do urbanites, was limited to one's own sex, with the men meeting the "lads" in the pub or heading for the football field or the racetrack. Women socialized with family members and neighbors while shopping or churchgoing but never in a "licensed premises." For women of this period, marriage nearly always meant enforced retirement from professional employment and the care of a large family with few household conveniences.

In recent years, an educated and emancipated breed of Irish women, with small families, "all mod cons," and paid employment has revolutionized Irish society. Ireland's president, Mrs. Mary Robinson, is a prominent spokeswoman for these new women and in spite of her outspoken feminism has remained a practicing Catholic. Many Irish feminists, however, have either left the church or are openly critical of its treatment of women. Feminist journalists rail against Catholic beliefs or personalities—even Mother Teresa was attacked after a recent visit—in articles which would never have been printed in the national press a few years ago. Often those women who express their anger most openly against the church are the very ones who support the idea of women's ordination.

The present open availablity of contraception is almost entirely due to women who insisted that this was their right as free citizens, yet they have avoided the position taken by so

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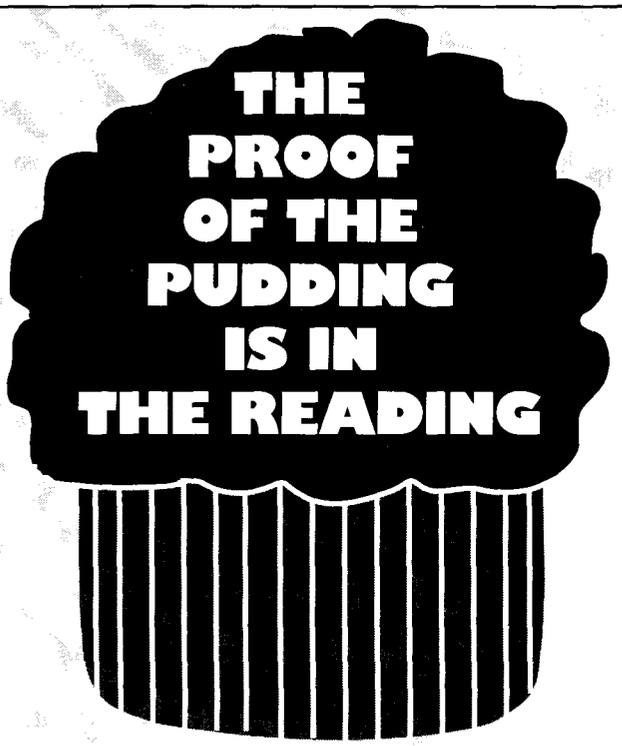

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many of their American sisters of seeming to support unlimited abortion. If the Constitution is ever amended to permit limited abortion and divorce, this radical social change will have been largely the work of Irish feminists.

Does all this turmoil, political and moral, mean that the Catholic church in Ireland is in deep trouble? Again, my answer can only be based on my superficial observations. Every Mass I attended was packed, but I only attended church in middle-class suburban parishes or in country churches. I was told that attendance is way down in working-class areas where anger over unemployment has alienated many workers from the "establishment," both church and government. In north Dublin city especially, crime is rampant and the evident poverty contrasts sharply with the conspicuous expenditure of the fortunate few in Dublin's more fashionable south side.

Though dwellers in poorer neighborhoods often sound cynical, their need for spiritual nourishment—or at least reassurance—is apparent in their lively interest in such phenomena as moving statues and weeping images. Before the present troubles in the former Yugoslavia, they stretched their slender budgets so that they could join the frequent flights to Medjugorje. I spoke to many who returned to Dublin with their faith renewed. Middle-class intellectuals, especially the media, have little patience with this form of piety but I suspect this devotionalism is the expression of a hunger which perhaps is not being satisfied by the low-key style of the Irish Catholic church.

The backbone of Ireland, the farming community, appears as loyal to the faith as ever. In Donegal, my Irish-speaking hostess, a mother of nine, had just returned from the rugged penitential pilgrimage at "Saint Patrick's Purgatory" on a bleak island in Lough Derg. In tiny Kilkieran in Connemara the church was thronged with students who sang like angels in the ancient language. Even in worldly Dublin, most of my fellow bus passengers crossed themselves each time we passed a church. On Irish national television the Angelus rings at 6 o'clock while a painting of the Virgin and Child is displayed.

What, if anything, do such outward signs say about the inward disposition of Irish Catholics? The troubled times have surely forced most traditional Catholics to examine their commitment to their faith. No doubt many, especially the young and those who attended church largely from a sense of social obligation, have drifted away. Yet I got a sense that those who remained did so now from conviction rather than from unquestioned convention. Judgments appear less narrow. Former harsh attitudes toward unwed mothers, for example, have been replaced by real compassion and a removal of the old stigma against them. Relations with Protestants have become far more relaxed. A retired barrister told me how relieved he was now that he no longer was required to stand outside the door of a Protestant church during the funeral of a non-Catholic friend.

This same wise friend seemed to me to sum up neatly the position of many in today's Irish Republic when he said: "Perhaps we Irish are not as 'Catholic' as we used to be—but I think we may be more Christian." □

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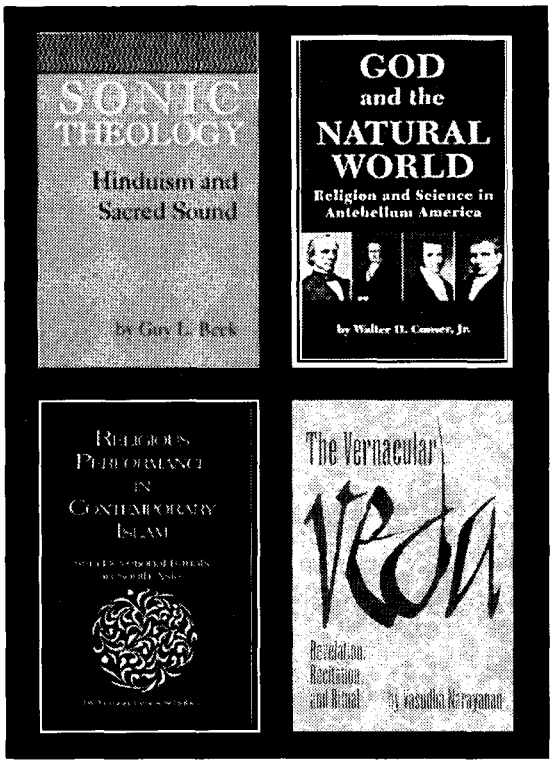
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Catholic identity after Vatican II

ROBERT P. IMBELLI

In a path-breaking article, written to commemorate the fifteen hundreth anniversary of the Council of Chalcedon, Karl Rahner posed his famous question: "Chalcedon—End or Beginning?" His answer was, of course, both; though in the Roman Catholicism of the early 1950s the second term of the disjunction was scarcely self-evident.

One might pose the same question regarding the Second Vatican Council; clearly, for Roman Catholics and others as well, the defining ecclesial event of our century. And the response would undoubtedly be the same: both an end and a new beginning. It brought an end to one period of Roman Catholic self-understanding and ushered in a new age. After all, the council was convened by John XXIII to undertake an *aggiornamento*: a bringing up to date of the Catholic vision and mission, of the changeless and changing Catholic enterprise.

Generalizations are, of course, hazardous; but the case can be argued that the pre-Vatican II Catholic self-understanding was unduly restrictive and reactionary; that it often viewed the surrounding culture in suspicious if not hostile fashion; that it lacked a discriminating historical sense; and that its zeal for unity too often satisfied itself with a rather rote uniformity. None of the above assessment gainsays the very real pastoral and missionary achievements of pre-Vatican II Catholicism nor disputes its ability to promote a magnificent witness of both homely and heroic holiness.

However, by the early 1960s both the ecclesial and cultural situations had made a fresh examination of Catholic identity imperative. Vatican II launched a truly courageous discernment of spirits on the part of the church and its millions of faithful. That the *aggiornamento* itself was, arguably, more than sixty years overdue is not a subject to be pursued here; but its mere mention affords some perspective upon the council's poignantly troubled aftermath, both pastoral and theological.

For the years subsequent to the council have witnessed an inordinately large measure of polarization within Catholicism, to the point where sometimes even civility, much less charity, has seemed a casualty. The antagonists have contended under the not always helpful banners of "traditionalists" and "progressives" or (more polemically) "restorationists" and "innovators." Like the erstwhile political designations "conservative" and "liberal," the labels seem to camouflage as much as they clarify. But they do point to tendencies and concerns that crystallize around themes like tradition and experience, universal church and local church, sacramental structure and justice advocacy, identity and openness, and even, ultimately, the transcendence and immanence of God.

In the heat of debate the unimpeachable legitimacy of many of the concerns that animate both parties can receive scant attention. But, even when acknowledged, what is often lacking is a sufficiently comprehensive framework to integrate the both/and of the Catholic vision and prevent its collapse into a polarized and less productive either/or. Hence I am always alert for theological writings that articulate and promote a catholicity of both scope and attitude, intellectual expansiveness wed to generosity of spirit. In this regard the achievement of Frans Jozef van Beeck is simply outstanding.

Van Beeck, a Dutch Jesuit, has been teaching in the United States since 1968, for many years at Boston College, and currently as the Cody Professor of Theology at Loyola University in Chicago. His inaugural lectures there, published in 1985 under the title, *Catholic Identity after Vatican II*, serve as an invaluable orientation to his thinking and to the exciting project in systematic theology that is unfolding in his multivolumed, *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology*. Volume 1 of *God Encountered*, "Understanding the Christian Faith," appeared in 1989. Volume 2, titled "The Revelation of the Glory," will, when completed, comprise four parts. "Part 1" was published in 1993 as "Introduction and Fundamental Theology." Part 2, "One God, Creator of All That Is," is at the printers' and should appear later this year. Part 3, "Finitude and Fall," is almost completed and scheduled for publication in the fall of 1995, and will be followed, *Deo volente*, by part 4, "The Glory of God in the Face of Christ." Finally, the massive undertaking will be completed by a volume 3, "A World in Transformation," devoted to the return of all creation to its fount and origin, through worship, sacrament, church community, and mission.

Set forth thus schematically the project may seem dry and even daunting. On the

ROBERT P. IMBELLI, *a priest of the Archdiocese of New York, teaches systematic theology at Boston College.*

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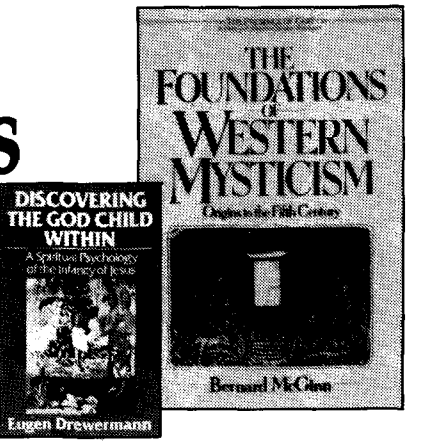
contrary, I have found reading the available volumes a singularly bracing experience. Van Beeck's writing combines intellectual rigor and aesthetic elegance. It offers abundant challenge, but also ample delight. In many ways he is the Rubens of contemporary theology: working on a vast canvas, his work exhibits superb organization, but often arrests with vivid detail. His goal, as he states it in *Catholic Theology after Vatican II*, is to sketch "a new spiritual-pastoral-theological synthesis" as a theological response to the task set by Vatican II, which inaugurated "a significant rearrangement of the themes and emphases of the Catholic faith-experience." In what follows I shall highlight some distinctive features of van Beeck's synthesis.

Van Beeck holds that the theologian's primary and defining commitment and loyalty is to the church's tradition. In this "great tradition" Scripture has pride of place; but it embraces also creedal confessions and conciliar teaching, as well as the Spirit-inspired witness of martyrs and mystics, prophets and poets, activists and contemplatives through the ages. For this tradition is a living reality, avid to appropriate more fully its foundational vision and to integrate, with discriminating openness, the values of the new cultures it encounters. Hence ongoing discernment and interpretation are ingredient to the church's life and to theology's craft.

For van Beeck the church's worship is the privileged place where the living heart of the tradition comes to fullest expression. Here is celebrated that "wondrous exchange," wherein God and humanity are inextricably joined in the mystery of Incarnation, thus making possible humanity's intimate and awesome sharing in the very life of God. The lovely Latin antiphon from Evening Prayer for the Feast of Mary the Mother of God—"*O admirabile commercium!*"—serves as epigraph for each of the volumes of *God Encountered*, thereby sounding the leitmotif of the entire synthesis and rooting it securely in the great tradition's liturgical and doxological depth.

The very title of van Beeck's opus, *God*

Discovering the Treasures Within.....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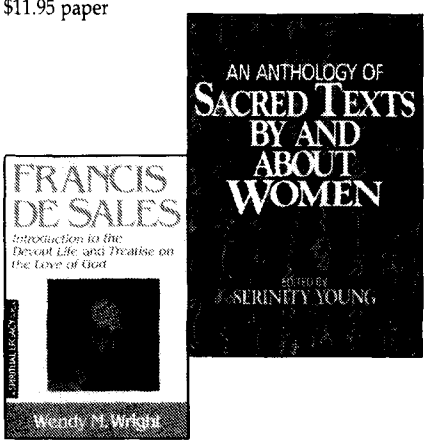
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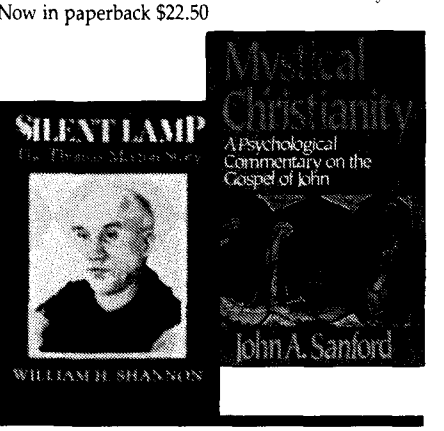

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Encountered, deserves comment. The focus falls upon the *objective* realities of faith, and in particular the God whose initiative and agency originates, sustains, and transforms created reality. Thus, though he by no means repudiates modernity's "turn to the subject," so cogently claimed for Catholic theology by Karl Rahner, van Beeck characteristically stresses the *Trinitarian* essence of faith that evokes and structures Christian worship and praise, not the self-experience and expression of the worshiping subject or community. As he confesses, in words that challenge so much of the current dismal dwelling upon the therapeutic: "Worship is abandon, not cultivation of self. Its focus is away from self, on God. Elicited by God's presence, to God's presence it responds, with fruits beyond intending and thus beyond all telling. The only adequate and lasting reason for worship is: that God is God."

The worshiper is summoned, therefore, less to self-fulfillment than to self-transcendence, to ecstatic abandon in joyful praise and service. In the context of Christian worship this new life of grace is further specified as personal communion with God through the risen Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Christological center of Christian faith is manifest in the church's worship "*through* Jesus Christ our Lord," but it also permeates and "informs" all Christian reflection and action. As van Beeck forthrightly avers: "the Catholic church and her members can make no real sense, either of their identity or of their mission, unless they go back to their abiding foundation: the risen Lord."

Books discussed in this essay

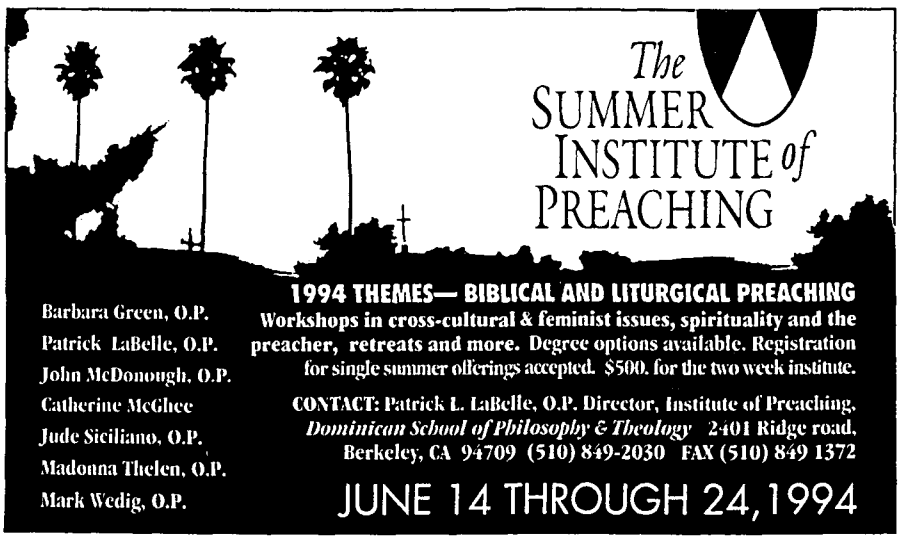
Catholic Identity after Vatican II: Three Types of Faith in the One Church, *by Frans Jozef van Beeck, S.J., Loyola University Press, $9.95, 113 pp.*

God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Understanding the Christian Faith, *by Frans Jozef van Beeck, S.J., Harper & Row, $27.95, 338 pp. (Available through the Liturgical Press.)*

God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology, Volume 2, part 1: The Revelation of the Glory: Fundamental Theology, *by Frans Jozef van Beeck, S.J., the Liturgical Press, $19.95, 360 pp.*

Such emphasis upon the centrality of Christ for Christian vision and mission might appear tautological were it not that the Christological center (which Vatican II took as a given) needs today to be recovered in a way that is creative and compelling, in the face of and (one dares hope) as a reconciliation of the polarizations that have plagued the post-Vatican II period. Certainly one of the main attractions of van Beeck's synthesis is the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ in his theology and the clearly Christic form of his spirituality. "In Christ we see the original fullness of what is offered to the church by way of grace and participation. There is a depth here that must not be traded away for anything. It must remain at the heart of all Christian faith-experience."

Jesus Christ, through whom God is encountered, is, however, not a figure of the past whose words and deeds are subjected to an allegedly unbiased academic scrutiny, but the living and present Lord whose *Spirit* empowers discipleship and participation in the life of God. This "pneumatological" sensitivity is another hopeful and attractive note of van Beeck's synthesis and marks a further recovery of the great tradition of the undivided church of East and West. Like the second-century theologian Irenaeus, the author of the great tradition's first "spiritual-pastoral-theological synthesis" (and one from whose work he appreciatively draws), van Beeck robustly holds Christ and Spirit in tensive unity: the "two hands" with which God accomplishes all God's works. In representative fashion he writes: "The risen Jesus, present in the Spirit, therefore, evokes, not detached affirmation of, but participation in, his divine identity. Professing Jesus' divine Sonship involves us; involvement with God's Son makes us children of God....The New Testament conveys this by having the risen Christ communicate the Holy Spirit...." Such participation and discipleship do not constitute for the Christian a hindrance to openness and dialogue, but provide its positive basis. The creed itself, the symbol of the community's encounter with God, professes belief in the one God, who is creator of all that is seen and unseen; and the universal Christian hope anticipates the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Between creation and new creation, the Catholic vision celebrates and proclaims "the depth of God-given nature being encountered by the height of God-given grace." Here grace is by no means alien to nature; and nature is inherently open to graced transformation. Characteristic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of van Beeck's synthesis is this affirmation of distinctions, coupled with the resolute refusal to allow them to harden into dichotomies.

Thus volume 2, part 1 engages issues of "fundamental theology." Van Beeck understands fundamental theology to be the perennial moment of the theological commitment to faith seeking understanding that, inspired by the essential openness and universalist perspective of the great tradition, ponders the sensitivities, insights, and values of a given culture and engages in respectful and discerning dialogue. Such fundamental theology may eventuate either in cultural critique or in the purification and advancement of the tradition or both. If all Christian theology of necessity mediates between faith and culture, fundamental theology undertakes the mediation most self-consciously and thematically.

By incorporating fundamental theology as a moment in the enterprise of systematic theology, van Beeck clearly opts for both "Jerusalem" and for "Athens:" for *both* the positive faith tradition symbolized by the city of David the King and of Jesus the Christ *and* for the native human integrity symbolized by the city of the philosophers. But clearly Jerusalem holds the primacy and provides the orientation: the revelation of the Glory, the very Word of God, became flesh there, recapitulating and transfiguring all the aspirations and intimations embodied in human nature and culture.

Within the concrete commitment of Christian faith, then, fundamental theology cherishes humanity's native yearning for communication and communion. In doing so it affirms the dignity of human reason and its attainments, even as it suggests that reason surpasses itself and finds its fullness in faith. Finally, it shows that the deepest desires of the human heart are freed, not stymied, by ecstatic surrender to the God who is greater than our hearts. Thus it attests that "[i]n the actual life of growth-by-desire, the essential features of native aspiration are laid bare: humanity is revealed as immanently, indelibly attuned to God, and that attunement turns out to be dynamic—a natural desire for God."

In fashioning his "spiritual-pastoral-theological synthesis," van Beeck has clearly consulted the saints and the mystics and has entered into attentive conversation with them. He is in fact accomplishing what so many have called for: a new integration of theology and spirituality that does not sacrifice either the exigencies of the mind or the realizations of the heart. One salient instance is his recovery of the spiritual tradition's reflection upon the three stages of growth in the Spirit (variously articulated, but generally construed as "beginners," "those making progress," and "the mature") and his correlation of these stages with the objective structures of faith: teaching, life, and worship. His quasi-technical designation for these "types of faith experience and identity" are the "pistic," the "charismatic," and the "mystic." It is stimulating to follow his weaving of this richly diversified theme through the published volumes and to appreciate how it helps clar-

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ify and further the post-Vatican II search for an integral and open Catholic identity.

Like Friedrich von Hügel (whose threefold differentiation of the institutional, the critical, and the mystical elements of religion his own usage resembles), van Beeck insists upon the validity and necessity for all three dimensions of faith experience. But he clearly privileges the depth and comprehensiveness realized by the mystic abandonment of self to God and neighbor, receiving through this paschal process the graced gift of a new relational self. "Thus dispossessed, divested, and disarmed, their souls more and more live beyond the ecclesiastical dilemmas and the judgments necessarily implied in them; they find their identity neither in the limits nor in the openness of the church, but most importantly, in its depth."

That depth, of course, is Christ. And the mystic is one who passes beyond (without bypassing) mere profession or even imitation of Christ to attain union. He or she (both Jan van Ruysbroeck and Teresa of Avila serve in the first part of volume 2 as crucial and exemplary witnesses) realizes the worshipful encounter, the wondrous exchange with the living God not only *through* and *with* the Risen Christ, but *in* him. For "the Risen Christ is the mystical source of identity and mission" and, therefore, "the ground that sustains the Christian mystic in everything is union with Christ."

For several years now, in speaking and writing about post-Vatican II polarization, I have suggested, in shorthand fashion, that it has tended to pit adherents of chapter 3 of the council's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (on the church's hierarchical structure) against advocates of chapter 2 (on the church as people of God). And I have expressed my conviction that the identity experiences embodied in these sometimes contrasting narratives and commitments are valid, but that, in isolation, they represent only half-stories. Indeed, they remain rootless, not *Christian* stories at all, unless implanted in the soil of chapter 1 (the mystery of the church).

That mystery achieves transparency in Christ who alone is the light of the nations, the unique *Lumen gentium*. The church can do no other and no more than to reflect Christ's light; for only "in Christ" can it claim to be, in the words of the council, "the sacrament of unity of humankind with God." The church is the *sacrament* of the wondrous exchange, the *admirabile commercium*; Christ is its *reality*. It is the mystic who is rooted in the mystery of Christ and thus becomes attuned to the very heart of the church.

The merit of van Beeck's comprehensive synthesis in the making is that it is magnificently "mystagogic": it leads us ever beyond formulations and causes toward mystery and urges us to the mystical abandon that alone surrenders fully to mystery. And, wondrous to behold, "the mystery is this: Christ in you, the hope of glory!" (Col. 1:27). □

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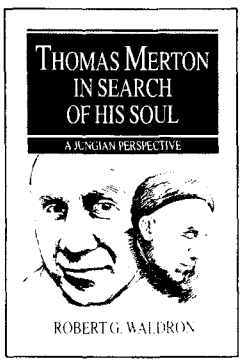

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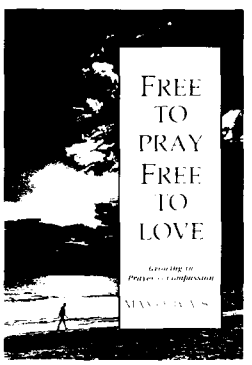

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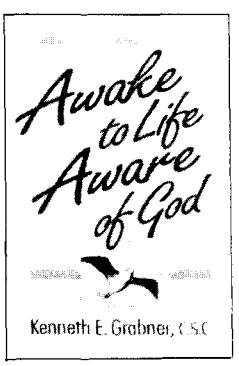

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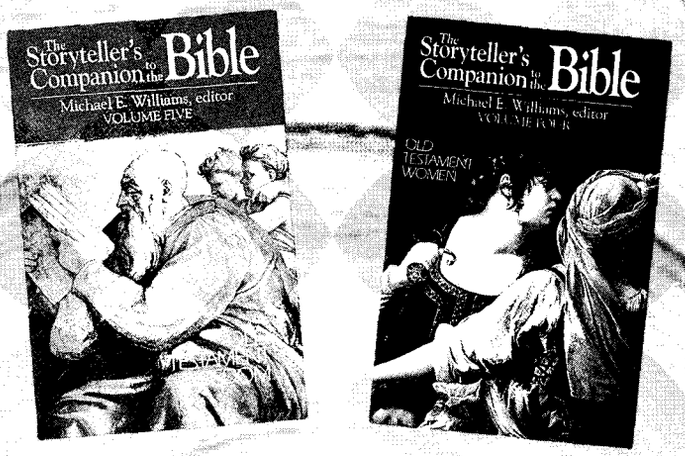

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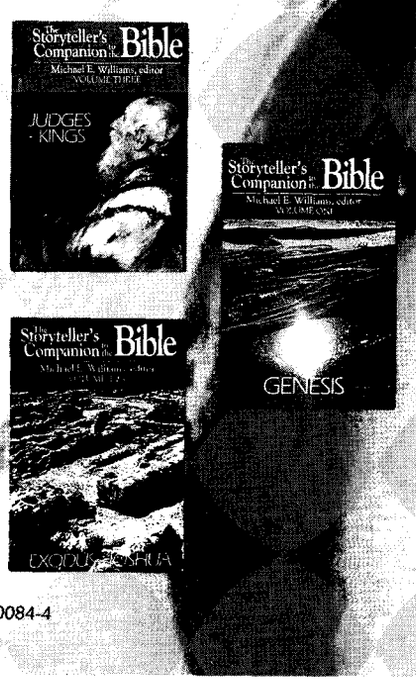

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CHAPTERS INTO VERSE
Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible
Assembled and Edited by Robert Atwan and Laurance Wieder
Vol 1: Genesis to Malachi, Oxford University Press, $25, 481 pp.
Vol. 2: Gospels to Revelation, Oxford University Press, $25, 391 pp.

Suzanne Keen

Imagine that you are to be confined indefinitely—perhaps for life—and you may take one book along. What will it be? Shakespeare? The Bible? I love to play this game and have refined it with some additional guidelines. No fair: anything on CD ROM. There is only one electrical outlet in your cell and the three-pronged plug of your computer will not fit. Magazine subscriptions and multivolume series are likewise forbidden (Sorry, *Commonweal* readers.) However, you may select a multivolume set that bears a single title, such as *The Works of John Ruskin*, or *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Choose carefully! Playing this game inevitably leads me to the same impasse: the Bible or poetry? For a long while I have contented myself with the answer, *The Works of John Milton*. Milton covers the biblical territory, give or take a few heresies, and the verse wouldn't wear thin quickly. But a nagging voice in the back of my head whispers, "What about lyric poetry?" Oh dear, I would miss it! How many poems can I commit to memory before they take me away?

Robert Atwan's and Laurance Wieder's magnificent two-volume anthology, *Chapters into Verse: Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible* is the perfect book for my imaginary solitary confinement. Astonishingly, no one has collected poems inspired by the Bible before, although hymns, carols, religious verse, and mystical poetry have been amply anthologized. Of course, English poetry from the Middle Ages has often engaged itself with Scripture, with theology, and the spiritual life; there is a sense in which any good historical anthology illustrates poetry's relationship to the Bible. Yet the multipurpose notes of college texts such as *The Norton Anthology* in effect put biographical and historical details, explanations of Greek and Roman mythology, literary allusions, and scriptural references all on the same level. These brief notes cannot distinguish among allusions, paraphrases, arguments with, and imaginative retellings of Scripture; even now, editors assume a greater familiarity with the Bible than most college-age readers possess. Instructed to get a copy of the King James Bible, many students of English poetry fail to read it; why should they, when it is treated as a reference book? *Chapters into Verse* eloquently demonstrates the importance of Scripture as a source text for poets and more effectively recommends the Bible as a vital, stimulating book in itself than any other recent work I know.

Chapters into Verse accomplishes this feat by quoting liberally from the Bible, in anticipation of the poems that follow. There is no need to flip back and forth between text and appendix; a reader can begin at the beginning, when "God created the heaven and the earth," and read through two volumes, in order, to poems based on verses from Revelation. The selections are generous, comparable to the excerpts employed in the liturgy, and they are printed in a handsome boldface that sets them off from the poems that follow. Atwan and Wieder imagine that readers will want to refer to the Bible for more, but they have constructed their collection so sensibly that it can stand alone. *Volume 1: Genesis to Malachi*, corresponds to the Hebrew Bible and *Volume 2: Gospels to Revelation* to the New Testament; and they do differ. The editors write that "the poetry of the New Testament is largely lyrical and meditative, verse that seems better suited to the more inward and private response encouraged by the spiritual quest of Jesus. The Old Testament, on the other hand, invites a more public, less personal and introspective, poetry." That the Hebrew Bible contains a great deal more verse than the mainly prose New Testament also affects poets' reactions to their source texts. The most significant difference between the two parts lies in the editors' decision to "harmonize" the four Gospel accounts, rather than presenting poems based on Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in subsequent sections. Readers choosing one volume or the other for purchase will do well to flip a coin!

That Atwan and Wieder not only "edit," but "assemble" this collection is by far the most impressive quality of *Chapters into Verse*. Of course, Blake, Herbert, Milton, Dickinson, Hopkins, and a host of familiar seventeenth-century poets provide the bulk of the poems. Yet the editors have endeavored to include many twentieth-century poets, as well. We expect to find Auden (and we do), but we also discover John Ashbery, Countee Cullen, Geoffrey

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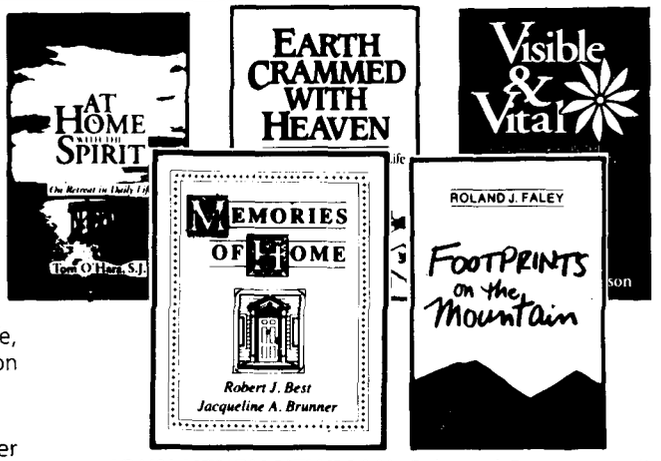

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Hill, Laura Riding Jackson, Denise Levertov, Muriel Rukeyser, Charles Reznikoff, and Eleanor Wilner. The presence of the modernist poets, including poets of the Harlem Renaissance, and a very broad range of contemporary poets, many of them women, makes obvious the fact that twentieth-century poets have not abandoned the Bible. Since the poems were tested to meet two criteria, "real literary merit" and derivation from a specific scriptural source, the reader never senses that a poem has been included because its maker belongs to a particular race, creed, or ethnicity. That *Chapters into Verse* presents the work of Jewish poets; Christian poets; agnostic poets; women and men; representatives of many centuries and several continents emphasizes the diversity of voices who have been stimulated to utterance by the words of Holy Writ. One of the real pleasures of reading these volumes comes from the juxtapositions of voices, forms, and attitudes, as when Li-Young Lee's response to the Song of Solomon follows Edward Taylor's. Over three hundred years separate these two American poets, but they join in poetic conversation. (The index of poets helpfully provides the poets' dates.) Readers of the poetry that appears in every issue in *Commonweal* will be pleased to discover one of Anne Porter's poems, "Oaks and Squirrels," in the selection of poems based on Genesis.

In evaluating a treasure-trove such as *Chapters into Verse*, I find it impossible to single out a particular poem for praise, although many poems struck me as candidates for a catalogue of excellence. The hundred (or so) pages in volume 1 that include poems based on Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon gave me more pleasure than almost any single volume of poetry I have read this year. Another reader might single out the pages in volume 2, where poems based on the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles rival my choice. Beautifully made, with prints by William Blake on the dust-jackets; considerately edited to make older verse accessible through modernization; judiciously filled but not overstuffed with excellent poetry, *Chapters into Verse* is everything that an anthology ought to be. It will sustain many hours of pleasurable reading and reflection. □

TO DO THEOLOGY: THINK, PRAY, ACT

RETRIEVING FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY
The Three Styles of Contemporary Theology
Gerald O'Collins, S.J.
Paulist Press, $14.95, 225 pp.

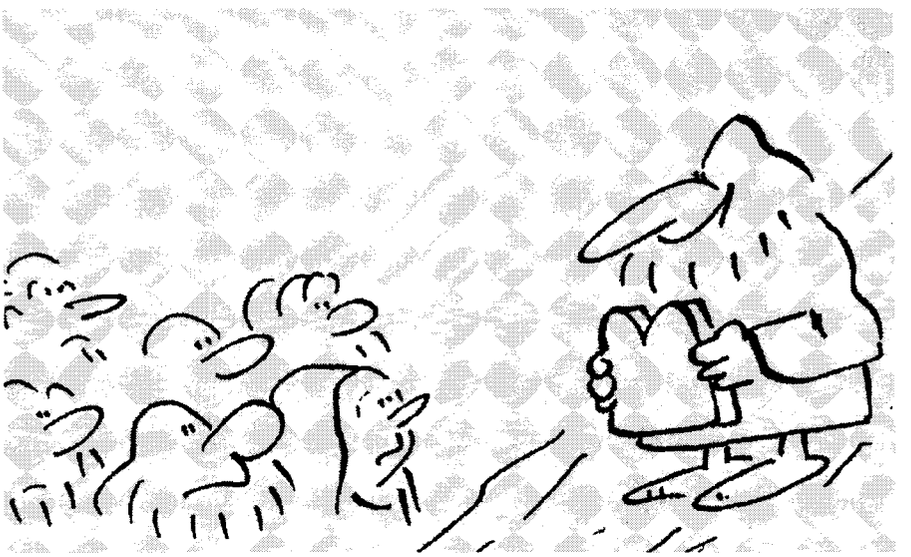
Avery Dulles

This book, somewhat misleadingly titled, centers about the teaching of Vatican II on revelation. It covers much the same ground as the author's earlier *Fundamental Theology* (1981), the book that is perhaps being "retrieved" here. Besides being updated, the present work is simpler than its predecessor and more focused on Vatican II, but the themes and positions are similar.

For the most part I strongly agree with the author's positions. After pointing out that Vatican II's approach to revelation is interpersonal, biblical, historical, Christocentric (and yet anthropocentric), sacramental, and ecumenical, O'Collins adds that the council views revelation as a saving event, God's symbolic self-communication in history. He notes that the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (*Dei verbum*), while presenting the principal treatment, does not contain the council's full teaching on revelation. Attention must be given to the other fifteen council documents. In particular, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (*Lumen gentium*) emphasizes the role of the church in mediating revelation. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et spes*) shows that revelation comes as a response to fundamental human questions and harmonizes with the deep cravings of the human heart. *Gaudium et spes* also shows how "the presence and purpose of God" continue to be mediated through the signs of the times, which must themselves be interpreted in the light of God's word.

Although generally satisfied with Vatican II's teaching on revelation, O'Collins points out several shortcomings. Two may be mentioned here. In comparison with Vatican I, the apophatic (or "veiled") dimension of revelation is less prominent. And in its Christocentic orientation, Vatican II tends to underemphasize the role of the Holy Spirit.

With regard to continuing revelation, O'Collins here reaffirms his previous position (already taken in his 1971 book,



"Oh, there's more—these are just the top *ten!"*

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Foundations of Theology) that "foundational revelation" became complete in the apostolic age, whereas "dependent revelation" continues to be given throughout the ensuing centuries. Although it might be possible to find better terminology, this position appeals to me as substantively correct. The deposit of faith became complete with the Apostles, but God has not fallen silent since the first century.

The chapter on revelation as God's symbolic self-communication gives a very helpful exposition of the kind of participatory, transformative knowledge yielded by symbols. Also excellent is the chapter on love as the essential content of Christian revelation. After a rewarding analysis of the meaning of love, O'Collins illustrates that meaning by a meditative exposition of the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke, chapter 15.

As a secondary theme, O'Collins takes up the nature of theology, which he discusses in terms of three "styles," centered respectively on academic study, social action, and worship. The dominant model of theology at Vatican II was that of a Christ-centered ecclesial science, open to dialogue and fresh investigation. Although the council gave primary emphasis to the cultivated use of reason (the first model), it recognized the importance of prayer and liturgy for theology (the third model), but the connection between theology and social action (the second model) received little notice in official Catholic teaching until the postconciliar period.

On a few minor points I am inclined to differ with the author. While O'Collins holds that Vatican II affirmed the presence of revelation in nonbiblical religions, I personally think that the council sought to avoid taking a position on whether the elements of truth and goodness in these religions are due to natural or revealed knowledge. The council can be interpreted as supporting the thesis that revelation is restricted to the biblical religions.

O'Collins is confident that everyone has an experience of God—an experience that is immediate, direct, and undeniable. I would prefer to say that whatever experience of God we normally have is mediated and elusive. As may be seen from his 1981 book, O'Collins's position is connected with his view of transcendental experience as "the primordial form of God's self-communication."

At one point O'Collins proposes a curious if not idiosyncratic thesis to the effect that the sixteen documents of Vatican II have a "canonical order" corresponding to the dates of their promulgation. At the same time he rejects any attempt to rearrange the New Testament books in the order of their composition. I doubt whether there exists any "canonical order" of the Vatican II documents, but if such an order were to be adopted, I think one should begin, as does the Abbott edition, with the four great constitutions which constitute the "hermeneutical center," as was recognized by the Extraordinary Synod of 1985.

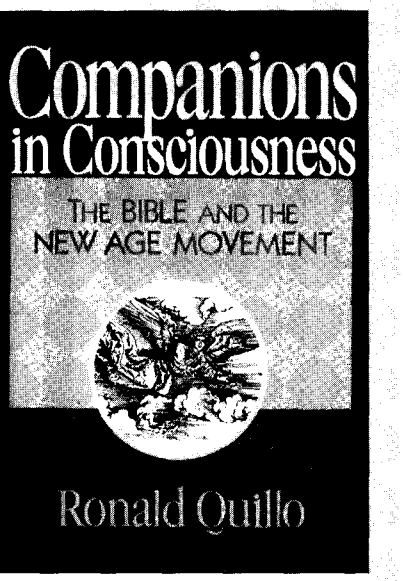
Do the canonical Scriptures pertain constitutively to public revelation? At some points O'Collins, quoting Piet Smulders, seems to lean toward the view that Scripture is only an inspired record of a revelation previously given in history. Elsewhere he appears to endorse the view of Archbishop Edelby that the history of revelation includes the composition of the sacred books and the formation of the apostolic tradition. I am personally inclined toward this second opinion.

Although O'Collins deals very adequately with the historical, symbolic, and experiential dimensions of revelation, he says much less about word-revelation, whether narrative or doctrinal. He might be accused of neglecting the need for apostolic tradition and authoritative doctrine to give a clear interpretation to the experiences and symbols of revelation.

The reservations that I have expressed are entirely secondary. I record them not to find fault with O'Collins but rather to indicate what is distinctive to his approach (and perhaps to my own). These differences of approach do not diminish my enthusiasm for this book, which is possibly the best available introduction to the teaching of Vatican II on revelation, theology, and the use of Scripture. O'Collins writes as a seasoned expert, thoroughly familiar with the primary and secondary literature. His opinions are reasonable and well-argued, and are presented in an accessible, nonpolemical style. At a number of points his positions reflect theological advances made since the council. □

A probing comparison of biblical faith and New Age awareness.

COMPANIONS IN CONSCIOUSNESS
The Bible and the New Age Movement
Ronald Quillo



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SAVE THE BABY & THE BATH WATER

EVANGELIZING THE CULTURE OF MODERNITY
Hervé Carrier
Orbis Books, $18.95, 164 pp.

WHERE HAVE YOU GONE, MICHELANGELO?
The Loss of Soul in Catholic Culture
Thomas Day
Crossroad, $19.95, 240 pp.

Dennis M. Doyle

Western civilization has borne the brunt of much criticism in recent years, particularly in works intended to promote multiculturalism. Two current books seek to reverse that trend.

Hervé Carrier, long known for his writings in the sociology of religion, offers a collection of essays that reflect his work as the former secretary for the Pontifical Council on Culture. Drawing heavily upon the writings of John Paul II, he expresses what amounts to a quasi-official Catholic view of inculturation. After a masterly introductory essay exploring the impact of Vatican II on the question of culture, Carrier gets to his main topic: an analysis of the modern first-world culture that needs to be re-evangelized. This analysis reads almost as if it were Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)* revised for the 1990s. Carrier couples the enthusiastic hope of that document with a realistic assessment of the limitations and failures of contemporary societies. In place of the unchecked global development that many at the council anticipated, one finds widespread economic injustice; crises in the family, workplace, and schools; an excessive individualism ironically producing a mass culture of standardized tastes; and violence, disorder, and destruction on a scale that leads some to believe that humankind stands on the brink of a new barbaric age. Still, Carrier maintains an optimism regarding fundamental human capacities and an appreciation of the real advantages brought about by science, technology, medicine, and social communications. The following essays extend this discussion, giving some attention to the interplay between Western and non-Western cultures.

Carrier acknowledges that his approach to non-Western culture is more sensitive to cultural diversity than positions the church has traditionally taken. However, Carrier does not engage more radically inclusive Catholic writers such as Robert Schreiter (who edits the Orbis series in which this collection appears) or Aylward Shorter (who has been somewhat critical of John Paul II in these matters). Carrier stresses the Vatican II position that any cultural phenomena compatible with the gospel must be preserved, fostered, and elevated to a new level. This represents what Schreiter calls an "adaptation" model of inculturation, which is a clear advance over pre-Vatican II approaches. Schreiter and Shorter, however, though surely distinguishable from each other, both advocate a full immersion within the context of a given culture as necessary for the gospel to be heard and to take root. For them, it is not enough to consider extrinsically whether local marriage arrangements, ritual customs, reverence for ancestors, and practices of healing and exorcism might be adapted within cultural frameworks historically associated with the gospel; one must be so firmly planted as to be able to hear what the saving message of Christ sounds like to people within a local situation.

Schreiter labels approaches like his own and Shorter's as "contextual," because one begins from within a particular culture. Although Carrier, too, sees evangelization as a two-way dialogue, there is no question as to which dialogue partner remains ever on top. Schreiter and Shorter pay more attention to the authentically religious dimensions already existing within a culture and are eager to concede the corrupting elements of Western culture historically associated with the gospel. For Shorter and Schreiter, the interchange of values and critiques is more mutual.

I do not mean to suggest that Carrier's position is diametrically opposed to the more inclusive models. Rather, it is mainly a question of where one sets the balance. Carrier himself is insistent upon what all cultures share: the transcendent nature of the human person, expressed in wondrous diversity. For Carrier, it is precisely the openness to human transcendence that makes possible the incarnation of the gospel in any society. He argues that in spite of many flaws, openness has historically characterized Western culture. Yet now we are in danger of losing that sense of the transcendent. Modern culture, for all of its real advantages, has also brought with it unprecedented forms of alienation, disillusionment, fear, anxiety, and depersonalization. According to Carrier, the solution lies not in abandoning Western culture, but in engaging the deepest and most authentic elements of all cultures—including that of the West. He writes:

"Maybe we're not attaining enlightenment because we're understaffed."

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"Over the centuries, the advances in theological reflection, biblical exegesis, the history of dogma, spiritual doctrines, conciliar and canonical formulations are due to a maturation of faith as it was lived in both the Eastern and Western churches, parts of the universal church. The church of the future will continue to grow out of the same roots and the same common stem that link it historically to its beginnings."

Western culture's fragmentation is also a major focus of the latest offering of Thomas Day, who achieved fame and some notoriety with his *Why Catholics Can't Sing* (Crossroad) of three years ago. Day's new book is billed as a sequel of sorts, continuing his argument about how the liturgical renewal of the Catholic church in the U.S. is heading fast in a bad direction. Day hopes that a few simple prescriptions might turn the tide. Among his many fine suggestions are to hire and pay good music directors, not to overshoot the abilities of the congregation, to use some simple chant here and there, and not to reject indiscriminately traditional and even Latin hymns.

Day frequently raises the issue of multiculturalism. He is not opposed to savoring cultural diversity, but he believes strongly that the treasures of Western culture should be included in such endeavors, especially for Catholics who trace much of their ethnic heritage to Europe. *Where Have You Gone, Michelangelo?* differs from *Why Catholics Can't Sing* by having more to say about architecture and church design, a deeper historical analysis of the current situation, a more balanced and at times even positive appreciation of the reformed liturgy, and a somewhat more respectful attitude toward people generally.

The author writes like the musician that he is, rarely stating a clear argument and following it through logically, but rather striking a few themes and then playing them with an intricate blending of repetition and variation. One of his favorite techniques is to relate anecdotes about some unnamed individual or hypothetical group that capture what he thinks is wrong with liturgy today, and then to blast away with sarcasm and wisecracks. Where Rush Limbaugh targets the "liberals," Day goes after the "liturgical reformers" and the "aging hippies."

However, Day is no conservative ideologue. Nor is he the elitist snob that some people think. Day grew up in my native Philadelphia, and if I surmise correctly, he attended grammar school there in the fifties. Back then I knew dozens of kids who talked just like him. Day is a classic smart-alecky put-down artist armed with a rapid-fire delivery, something like a Don Rickles of the Catholic set. He's likely to give the politically correct heart attacks, but I'm convinced that he really doesn't mean any harm.

Moreover, he has two redeeming characteristics. First, he can be self-deprecating. Second, he is often on target with many of his criticisms. For all of my ambivalence about his sarcasm, Day's presentation will probably get his important message out to an unusually large audience.

Part of Day's message harmonizes well with the voice of Carrier; if one is going to be truly sensitive about matters of culture, then interest in Western culture with its rich history should not decrease, but rather increase. Carrier communicates this in the dignified tone of a distinguished scholar; Day gets it across with a mixture of erudition and schoolyard humor. Neither wants a wholesale preservation of the past, but both warn against discarding lightly a heritage so strongly linked with a sense of the transcendent. □

REVIEWERS

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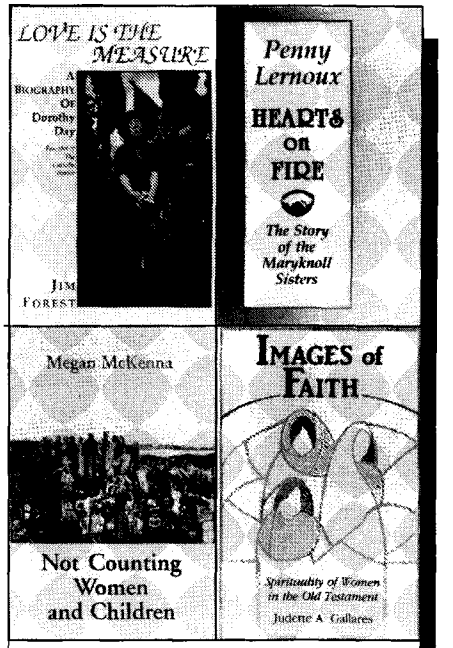

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CAN THEY MULTIPLY?

FULL PEWS AND EMPTY ALTARS
Demographics of the Priest Shortage in United States Catholic Dioceses
Richard A. Schoenherr and Lawrence A. Young
The University of Wisconsin Press, $19.95, 437 pp.

Patrick H. McNamara

Stardate 2005. The Captain's Log notes the full Catholic churches detected on planet earth (U.S.A.)—65 percent above the Catholic population of 1966—but registers a 40 percent loss of diocesan priests over the same period. Stark, relentless, inexorable. If the text were set to music, only the *Carmina Burana* would do.

The cadence of *Full Pews and Empty Altars* begins with the authors' determination to hammer out an incontrovertible set of data. Aided by a small army of research consultants and computer-savvy assistants, Richard Schoenherr and Lawrence A. Young (sociologists at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and Brigham Young University, respectively), developed a census registry for the U.S. Catholic clergy, 1966 through 1984, within eighty-five dioceses. Births, deaths, and events in between were recorded for each of 36,300 priests: ordination, migration, sick leave, retirement. This registry made possible the elaborate statistical analysis facing the reader in table after table, figure after figure, in both text and seven technical appendices. If you're looking for an easy read, forget this book. It's heavy going. What we are given, however, is an absolute gem of meticulous scholarship that defies ready summary. Now and for years to come, it will stand as *the* book that best explains what has been happening to the U.S. diocesan priesthood since the close of Vatican II.

Angry mavericks out to make their points? Schoenherr and Young don't come off this way, but they must have had their moments. Approved by a solid majority of U.S. bishops and funded by the Lilly Endowment, the study was opposed early on by a powerful, vocal minority of bishops. Its eventual publication, they argued, would promote the ordination of married men and women and discourage priest recruitment efforts—a self-fulfilling prophecy, in other words. Though their efforts ultimately failed, a few bishops did succeed in having the authors' funds cut off, thereby delaying publication for several years.

The major findings are set in contexts of historical events such as the issuance of *Humanae vitae* in 1968, and of several previous studies of the same topic: the works of Andrew Greeley, Dean Hoge, Raymond Potvin, Francis Scheets, Joseph Shields, and others are integrated into the discussion as is the earlier work of Schoenherr himself. Frameworks used in the demographic study of organizations illuminate the data throughout the book. Thus, from 1968 through 1973, during the "mass exodus" of priests, three-quarters of all ordinations were needed just to fill vacancies created by resignation (this figure dropped to 38 percent during the late 1970s and early 1980s). Resignations in the peak years were concentrated especially among clergy aged twenty-nine to thirty-four. The Pacific coast and south Atlantic dioceses were hardest hit. New York and New England were not far behind. When the study was finished in 1989, ordinations had yet to turn sharply upward.

As good demographers, Schoenherr and Young offer three projections culminating in the year 2005: (1) *optimistic*: relatively high ordination, but low resignation and retirement rates experienced during certain years between 1966 and 1985 will dominate; (2) *pessimistic*: relatively low ordination, but higher retirement and resignation rates occurring during certain years are likely to continue; (3) *moderate*: the "in-between" rates observable from 1980 to 1984 in their data will prevail. Even under the most optimistic scenario, however, "the number of active priests in 2005 will be about 23,000, over 34 percent fewer than the 35,000 recorded for 1966." Regionally, dioceses of the West and South generate the fewest local candidates for ordination and depend heavily on priests from elsewhere.

More positive themes do appear: dioceses more successful in recruiting and ordaining priests are those in "newly established urban areas where the general population is relatively poor and uneducated"; where a vibrant deacon program is operative; and where few Hispanics live. Why do larger Hispanic Catholic populations generate fewer priests? No one seems sure. Perhaps the American church has erred by "not aggressively recruiting or retaining Hispanic seminarians." Age at ordination is increasing, lending hope for greater retention and fewer resignations.

Nevertheless, "the sobering message of our research is that declining numbers of U.S. Catholic priests are virtually unavoidable, at least over the next decade or two." Will future events turn things around? The authors think the probability is low. They give two compelling reasons. First, Vatican II set forth the notion of "sacramental marriage as an alternative path to true Christian holiness which is equal though different from vowed celibacy." Second, the feminist movement has affected nuns and laywomen in ways that erode "male hegemony over the church's ministry and established a growing sense of female equality." At stake is continuation of the eucharistic tradition. Though some degree of centralized structure and control is necessary for Catholicism to preserve its unique identity, "the need to decide whether to preserve the eucharistic tradition or to maintain compulsory celibacy and male exclusivity looms ever larger as the priest shortage grows."

Looming larger, too, was my own sense of sadness as I closed the last page. The book went to press before the current sexual scandals had wreaked their damage on the image of the priesthood: will the more pessimistic projection finally hold sway?

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As a believer, I know the Holy Spirit can renew hearts and institutions alike, but I can't miss the lines of fatigue on the face of our local pastor, a wonderful priest running a huge suburban parish all by himself. How soon the empty altar? □

WE'RE STILL (SORT OF) RELIGIOUS

ONE NATION UNDER GOD
Religion in Contemporary Society
Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman
Harmony Books, $25, 320 pp.

James R. Kelly

Sociology is most likely to make it into the media when its findings contradict common sense. Kosmin's and Lachman's findings first appeared in hundreds of newspapers in April 1991. Their spin was that religion was doing pretty well in America and that politicians and others who did not realize this would not succeed. Kosmin and Lachman, researcher and dean, respectively, at City University of New York's Graduate Center, found traditional religion mostly alive and healthy, and a contributor to national unity. This might have surprised editors who, according to other surveys about *them*, find out about religion mostly from poll data.

The new story about religion in America, presented now formally in *One Nation under God,* turns out to be that it's pretty similar to the old one. The data seem to break both old and new ethnic and religious stereotypes. Most Americans who claim Irish or French descent are not Catholics, most American Muslims are not Arabs, and most Asians are Catholics. Talk of new religions and New Age religion is much exaggerated. There is even more generational continuity than gap. Among the under twenty-five, young-adult population, 86 percent of women and 81.1 percent of men identify with a Christian church or denomination. The authors conclude: "There is little evidence that Americans have abandoned religion during the course of the twentieth century."

The first social science question we need to ask is methodological. Kosmin and Lachman's first claim on our attention is that theirs is the only large, national sample on religion in the United States that we have. The only national Census Bureau Survey that included questions on religion was conducted in March 1957; all other Census Bureau efforts were stopped by objections from some Jews, Christian Scientists, and First Amendment guardians. The usual national surveys or polls asking about religion have sample sizes too small for much more than generic Catholic, Protestant, or "other" comparisons. Kosmin and Lachman used a much larger sample for their "National Survey of Religious Identification" (NSRI)—113,000 respondents (eighteen years or older). The poll was conducted by the commercial firm of ICR Survey Research Group of Media, Pennsylvania, and entailed selected telephone interviews from April 1989 to April 1990 by random digit dialing to achieve a geographically representative sample.

The authors describe the NSRI sample as "unique." For example, the sample includes 26,000 Catholics, including 900 black Catholics, 600 Asian-American Catholics, and over 3,000 Hispanic Catholics. Table 1-2 displays the number and estimated percentage of the adult population of forty-three distinct Protestant groups. Many Protestants—almost 10 percent, second only to Catholics and Baptists—do not identify themselves as members of a specific denomination but as members of a local church and refer to themselves simply as "Protestant." Samples from seventeen "other" religions (including Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Native American, New Age) and from agnostics, humanists, and an oxymoronic "religious nones" were also used. Readers are alerted to some sampling problems, such as the lack of telephones among Old Order Amish and the lack of English among newer immigrants. Similarly, Catholic officials tend to overestimate the number of Catholic Hispanics—Kosmin and Lachman found only two-thirds of Hispanics identify as Catholics—and underestimate Catholic success among Asians who now comprise 2 percent of all American Catholics. Non-English-speaking Hispanics

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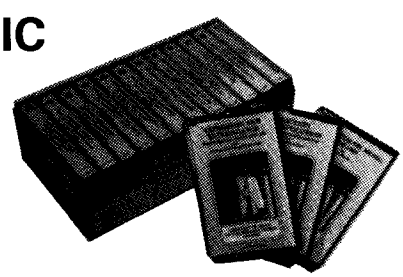

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might be most likely to be Catholic and non-English-speaking Asians to be other than Catholic.

It should be noted that the interviewees did not know that they were to be interviewed about religion. The questions on religion were mixed in with a longer series of questions about consumer preferences and other social issues. There was only a 2.3 percent refusal rate for the questions on religion, but the overall survey cooperation rate was 50 percent even after four attempts. The authors do not discuss whether those who refused to participate in a consumer preference survey might be different, especially with regard to judgments about religion, than those who were willing. Nor do they speculate about the indirect effects of placing questions about religion alongside questions about consumer preferences. Might this suggest to some willing interviewees that, just like any other commodity, Americans are also expected to have brand preferences about religion?

At any rate, Kosmin and Lachman found that most Americans not only had religious identifications but kept the ones they first found at home. Well-educated males were the most likely to switch brands, and the Pacific region had the highest proportion of religious switchers (36.5 percent) and New England (14.9 percent) the lowest. The most diverse religious markets are the Western states and they reported the most "no religion" answers. One-third of all Catholics live in the four states of New York, California, Pennsylvania, and Texas; only in Delaware do Methodists comprise as much as one-fifth of the population; and Jews show the most geographical mobility. Market researchers for religious merchandise will appreciate learning that the two states with a religious profile that most closely approximate the total United States are Missouri and Florida. Those looking for quick surprises will note that 90 percent of New Yorkers identify with a religious background and that one-third attend a public worship service in any given week. Those looking for quick solutions will be disappointed to learn that religious practice and belief are much more prevalent in high-crime areas, such as Brooklyn and the Bronx.

While the NSRI sample is larger by far than others, the overall findings basically corroborate what smaller samples have already told us. When asked, Americans tell surveyers that they are a religious people. Only 7.5 percent said they had "no religion." There are few grassroots American humanists, only .7 percent to be exact, and a few more agnostics, only 1.7 percent of them. But there's lots of religion. More than 86 percent of those polled identified with a Christian denomination, and 2 percent with a Jewish tradition. More specifically, Roman Catholics are the largest American religious group, about 26.2 percent. Baptists come next, with 19.4 percent of the population. While most of the mainline Protestant groups have lost about a quarter of their membership since the 1960s, many nonmembers maintain their religious identification. For example, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. lists only 3 million members but the NSRI estimates affiliation at nearly 5 million. Unfortunately for multicultural enthusiasts, most of the Asian-Americans said they were not members of Asian-based religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam, but that they were Catholics or Protestants. Native Americans follow the same pattern.

The authors caution against "an overemphasis on the differences between groups of people without equal attention to the common denominators that bind together all Americans." They disparagingly note the "premium on claims for special status." If you're looking for American success, look at black Catholics. Just about 9 percent of blacks are Catholic, representing about 5 percent of Catholics in general, but they are more likely to be college graduates than other Americans and 40 percent more likely than other black Americans. The religious affiliation of Asian-Americans in the 1990s is basically the same as that of other Americans—Catholics and Baptists are the largest groups. "Surprisingly few" New Age "devotees," Scientologists, or followers of Eckanar were found, and most were in California.

My review copy did not contain an appendix with the questions actually asked but the introduction explains that the questions simply asked about affiliation, not behavior. A book about "religion and contemporary American society" based on a few self-report answers to religious identification questions must be largely inferential. Some of the chapters are good summaries of available data. I liked especially chapter 5, "The Politics of Religion and the Religion of Politics," where, among other things, the authors report that evangelical Protestants now comprise 20 percent of the nation's population, that Catholics are still more likely to identify as Democrats (38 percent) than Republicans (27 percent) and are more likely than white Protestants to support an expanded role for government. National Opinion Research Center data show that 34 percent of Catholic college graduates believe that government should do more to improve society, whereas only 16 percent of white Protestant college graduates hold that opinion. But the explanations for Kosmin's and Lachman's findings in the other six chapters are mostly familiar and largely derivative. For example: "To some degree, all faiths in America have been Protestantized." And: "Religion in the United States frequently sanctifies the goals of a basically secular society, and the secular society affects and influences the very meaning of religious identification and association. It is therefore not surprising that America appears to be growing more secular precisely at a time when religious identification is highly pronounced."

The individualism of American religion and the religion-secular correlation is old stuff, and the authors simply rehash the discussion here. There's little additional freshness or energy beyond their survey findings. The authors limply conclude that "predictions are not always wise or safe," and their last sentence reads: "The important thing to realize is that religion in America is dynamic, creative, and relevant, continuously changing and developing."

If you read the conclusion first, you'd be tempted to turn right to the survey data and then skip all the commentary. I'd guess the book is most likely to be enthusiastically cited by those desirous of showing that secularist and multiculturalist "knowledge-class" agendas are highly unrepresentative of even minority American sentiment. □

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(Continued from page 2)

poses biology. In other words, a sexual ethic too eager to "transcend the biological" seems to me to slight the incarnated nature of sexual identity as well as the tradition's valorization of sexual love.

A sacramental system turns us toward the material or biological as both real and symbolic; we encounter the transcendent in and through the things of this world. Christ's "new creation" makes all things new, not all new things. Is it reductionist to require real eating and real bread and wine for the Eucharist? Catholics think not. Nor is it reductionist to place the "physical act itself" at the heart of an incarnational understanding of sexuality.

Indeed, where Stahel suspects "fundamentalistic" prejudices, I see sacramental necessities. I agree that in hallowing and concretizing the biological we must be careful not to absolutize it. But if we are to sustain the sacramental tension between spirit and matter, we must at some point tether our dialectic to nature, not just to the idealized self. When it comes to human sexuality, I think it most coherent to tether our metaphysical understanding to procreation. Stahel suggests we move to a more metaphorical understanding of sexual fruitfulness. I want to resist the drift away from sacrament toward metaphor.

Stahel's second question comes in several parts. Is celibacy a metaphysical dead-end in the same way that I suggest nonprocreative homosexual acts may be? I don't see how it could be since it is not, strictly speaking, a sexual act at all. The renunciation of and abstention from sexual acts honors rather than contradicts the meaning of sexual love. Christian celibacy has always presupposed a sexuality ordered toward procreation. As Peter Brown has written, sexual renunciation was a self-conscious act of biological and social discontinuity—a way of symbolically announcing the end time by withholding human cooperation in bringing about the future. In saying no to sex and children, early Christians offered eschatological witness to the "new creation" revealed in Christ's death and resurrection. But that "new creation," at least until the *parousia*, takes place within the continuum of creation, not outside it. In pointing to the consummation of all things in Christ, celibacy challenges the biblical procreative sexual norm, but it does not abolish the good order manifest in God's creation.

As to the question about Jesus Christ's birth: Of course God cannot be the product of a human procreative act. I'm not interested in sexualizing God or his actions. However, I am concerned about the implications of desexualizing and consequently disembodying Christ. In Christ, God has joined himself to man. Nothing is a more compelling sign of that mystery than the Virgin Birth. That Christ was born of a woman is a sign, I think, of Christ's full humanity and discloses something quite important about natality for all human beings. That doesn't mean that procreative sex and childbearing are divine activities, but it clearly suggests that the incarnation sanctifies the biological in ways that permit us to see in sexual love a natural sign of God's action. A metaphysical description of the conjugal act, in which we cooperate with God in bringing forth new life but in which God alone creates life, need not be written off as fundamentalistic.

PAUL BAUMANN

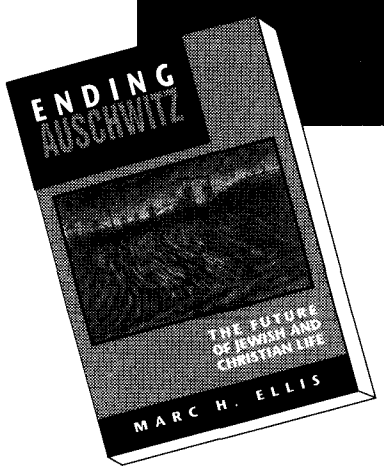
From the editors: More letters on these matters will appear in our next issue.

Reticent on gun control

Hollis, N.Y.

To the Editors: In your editorial discussing President Bill Clinton's first year in office ["A Needed Conversation," January 14], you discern in the signing into law of the Brady Bill an indication of his effectiveness and some hope for the future. Since I voted for Bill Clinton and felt very relieved when he was elected, I hope you are right about his political resiliency and capacity to persuade and lead.

But what about your own role? It's worth noting that there has been no real discussion of gun control in your pages over the past two years—not, at least, according to your annual indexes. During this time there have been two cursory refer-



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ences to gun control in *Commonweal*—the first being a sentence in a letter, the second a short letter responding to that sentence. The first letter was my own—I included a brief reference to gun control in a comment protesting a column by Margaret O'Brien Steinfels which imputed accountability to Mayor David Dinkins in the fatal shooting of a student in a Brooklyn high school. A response from a Florida correspondent gave the impression that, in his view, gun control is an exercise in futility.

That leaves a question: Where does *Commonweal* stand? It is reassuring to know that in your view President Clinton deserves credit for supporting and signing the Brady Bill, but your own position on realistic and effective legislation remains vague. ROLAND LAIRD

From the editors: No claim is made in these quarters that *Commonweal* covers all significant issues. Would if we could. Can't. In this case, our correspondent is mainly in the right about our past coverage, though he did miss one treatment, a review appearing in the issue of June 5, 1992, of a book by Gary Kleck, *Point Blank: Guns and Violence in America.* (Our annual index does not include book reviews by topic.)

To respond (briefly) to Mr. Laird's question: As might be inferred from our reference to the Brady Bill, *Commonweal* favors gun control, including measures much more comprehensive and stringent than that legislation.

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Rest stops

New York, N.Y.

To the Editors: I very much appreciated Edward Vacek's essay defending the value of leisure ["Never on Sundays," February 11]. We talk about leisure and work very hard to achieve it. But as soon as we achieve it, we fill it with work, even if of the nonservile kind. It is true, "the *Starship Enterprise* has no holy days." It does not even have holidays. Leisure and holidays are quite defensible on philosophic grounds, apart from biblical considerations regarding holy days. Not that they cannot buttress one another.

The difference between the Sabbath and the Lord's Day is important. As Vacek indicated, the Lord's Day is not just a Christian Sabbath. Sabbath rest is observed on the seventh day of the week when God rested. The Lord's day is observed in celebration of the Resurrection on the first day of the week when God worked.

As we watch the marketplace and competitive pressure erode our leisure, it is good to remember that ancient Greek and Roman societies did not provide our forebears with a weekly day of rest. Early Christians had to find a way to secure it and enjoy it in the Lord. More and more, we are faced with the same personal responsibility. But that is no reason to capitulate. If we have to go down, we should do so fighting.

EUGENE LaVERDIERE, S.S.S.

Dissent & truth

Silver Spring, Md.

To the Editors: As four credentialed Catholic theologians active on the board of Catholics for a Free Choice, we take issue with many points in Margaret O'Brien Steinfels's "Notebook" column of January 14 ["Drawing Lines: Quindlen, Kissling, & Us"]. So many, in fact, that we necessarily leave much unanswered, but then not every scurrility or inaccuracy deserves a response. Ms. Steinfels criticizes Anna Quindlen's critique of the bishops' statement on CFFC, with much nastiness directed at CFFC and Ms. Quindlen herself, creating a model we do not wish to emulate.

The central issue in the Steinfels piece is its theologically naive assumption about episcopal authority. Ms. Steinfels seems to assume that bishops are always right when they define a person or group as having "crossed the line" and as "not authentically Catholic." A chastening walk through history would show her that church authorities acting in concert have often erred robustly and have had to be corrected gradually by theologians and by the *sensus fidelium*, which involves the prayerful discernments and critical experiences of the laity.

"In ages past," Ms. Steinfels writes with odd nostalgia, "Catholics knew when they crossed the line because they could have been burned at the stake." But the next line is perhaps the most revealing of why CFFC has hit such a raw nerve. "Now they are more apt to be rushed into print or taped for the evening news."

The fact is that the international educational work of CFFC has not escaped the notice of the media. In part this is because it is clear that on certain subjects, notably those related to reproductive ethics, the hierarchy is out of sync with both the dominant theological views and the sense of the faithful. The press understandably takes note of this and wants to hear from all sides. The bishops do not appreciate this and would prefer that only their own voices be heard. Ms. Steinfels, it seems, would prefer that only the bishops and those among the theologians and laity who see things her way be heard.

CFFC acknowledges, with solid grounding in theology and history, that church authorities can err and that "dissenting in and for the church" often serves the discernment of truth. We join those who carefully make the case for the possibility of considered moral choices for birth control and abortion. This discussion, in

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Ms. Steinfels's words, "deserves at least a careful hearing and a reasoned response."

MARY E. HUNT
DANIEL C. MAGUIRE
GILES MILHAVEN
ROSEMARY RADFORD RUETHER

The author replies:

Bishops are not always right, no more than theologians or editors. In the case of Catholics for a Free Choice, I happen to agree with the bishops: CFFC is not an authentic Catholic organization nor does it speak for the Catholic church. (Neither do I see what warrant CFFC has in speaking for the *sensus fidelium* or even for dissident Catholics as a group.) My point—one of several missed or misread by the four credentialed theologians—is that the bishops' criticisms deserve a careful hearing and a reasoned response.

The letter writers now raise for me a further question: Why does the CFFC invest so much in insisting upon the Catholic identity and authenticity of an organization that their letter admits dissents from the church's teaching on a variety of reproductive issues?

Let me suggest a reason. The "international educational work of CFFC" does not escape the notice of the media because CFFC is, at least in part, a creature of the media. The media do not want to hear all sides on the abortion issue (the four credentials show a charming naiveté on this point). There are, after all, many sides to the abortion question, but the media recognize only two, those for and those against, and favors the former. The word "Catholic" in CFFC's title perfectly meets the media's need to trump one of the few serious and reasoned opponents of abortion, the Catholic church. The CFFC's well-oiled publicity machine is expertly attuned to take advantage of this fact: witness Anna Quindlen's half-baked attack on the bishops and her ardent defense of CFFC.

That church authorities err is not news. The question is: Can CFFC err? To wit, the four credentials write that they join with those who "carefully make the case for the possibility of considered moral choices for birth control and abortion," blithely running together two issues that occupy very different places on the Catholic moral spectrum. Haven't they, in fact, bought into the view of abortion proponents that there is no difference between contraception and abortion?

MARGARET O'BRIEN STEINFELS

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Meeting my Mother, again

JOHN CARMODY

It was a slow Sunday afternoon when a local priest whom I admired as a genuine pastor ambled into my room. The good father delivered himself of a few stories, his equivalent of small talk, and then asked what priests had been visiting me. I laughed and reported that spiritual ministrations had been minimal. Irritated, but not surprised, he asked if I would like to be anointed. With no thought, I said yes. So we went through a spare, adapted version of the church's ancient ritual that asks God's help for the seriously sick—begs divine support and comfort for both body and spirit. Although it began almost shamefully casually, this anointing proved to be the most moving moment in my month's stay in the hospital. Indeed, it has lodged itself among the half-dozen most moving religious experiences of my entire life.

When I took religious vows as a Jesuit, I thought my future would run as straight as a pair of railroad tracks. When I was ordained a priest, I knew my future would be hopelessly tangled, because I had lost faith in the church's rules about celibacy. In both cases, though, I assumed that I had time, that things would sort themselves out, that the wilderness could prove habitable, the desert could bear fruit.

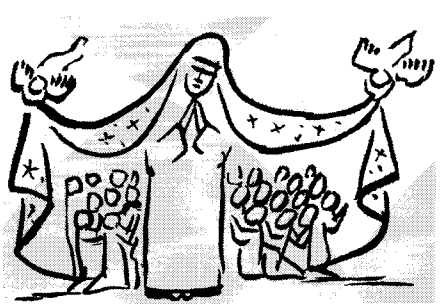
Lying in my narrow hospital bed, feeling the oil of gladness and healing, I knew I had little time. More importantly, though, I felt, by a wondrous grace, that this was the first time in my effective memory that the church, in the representative figure of one of its priests (who, at a still deeper level of representation, stood for Christ), was praying for me individually, by name, to deal with painful circumstances, suffering, and needs uniquely my own.

Even writing this description of what must have been at most ten minutes of unpretentious prayer moistens my eyes, as the anointing itself did in abundance. I realized, on my hospital pallet, that "Mother Church" had not been my mother for a long time. Psychologically (not theologically), Mother Church shouted that I was a big, big disappointment. Through the twenty-odd years of estrangement my typical response, usually thrown imaginatively toward the tubby clergy claiming to represent Mother Church, was a simple Italian hand gesture, bawdy and amused.

Anointing was a very different business. Something maternal really did appear. I truly felt taken to the bosom of a holy family that cared for me. It knew about my muscle spasms and dismal prognosis. It loved me despite my many manifest failings and my worst secret sins. And it dismissed the past history, the tubby clerics, the mutual antagonism and disappointment of mother and child, as irrelevant.

For once, the church did not point to itself but was transparent to God. For once it was a community of prayer, offering the praise and petition that have always been its primary reason to be. And, for what seemed to me the first time, I, little John, weak John, competent John, mixed-up John, strong John, very sick John had a name in this community. My pain grieved it. My dying would sadden and diminish it. I mattered. For once, I mattered.

I still can't get over the power in this feeling or perception of mattering, of being an irreplaceable individual. Where the bishop of Wichita had told me and my wife not to come to live in his diocese, because we would not be welcome, the church at prayer in my anointing said, "Welcome home. Forget that asshole."



Where the Roman authorities, in granting my dispensation from priestly celibacy to marry, had told me to move five hundred miles away, not to teach theology, and not to worry about my illegitimate children because the dispensation automatically legitimated them (in fact, my wife and I have no children), the church at prayer in my anointing said, "We ask God, who is wholly good, to strengthen your body and spirit, for we love you and care about you, as God does infinitely more. We are not clerics, bureaucrats, bloodless functionaries. We are your family, your brothers and sisters, mortal and sinful like you, sure one day to need anointing ourselves. Come close, into our embrace. Become part of the communion of saints as we intercede for you with God."

I know that terminal illness can throw people for emotional as well as physical loops. I know that on that Sunday afternoon I was susceptible to a great range of feelings. But I also know, with far greater certainty, that my anointing that day was the most sacramental experience I've had in a long time, the most healing and edifying. Blessings on that good priest who wandered in because of the radar good priests develop. Blessings on all the Christians through the centuries who have molded the sacrament of the sick. And, above all, blessings on you, Mother Church, for showing me, if only for a little while, that your maternity is more than rhetorical. □

John Carmody is the author of Cancer and Faith: Reflections on Living with a Terminal Illness *(1994), from which this article is excerpted with the permission of Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, Connecticut 06355.*

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